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ADVOCATES WORK TO HELP ALL SEVERELY WOUNDED

By Mike Heronemus
Editor

Wounded Soldiers assigned now or in the past or who mobilized through Fort Riley have two more resources helping them return to a normal life – and maybe even to collect thousands of dollars in financial benefits they are entitled to.

Elizabeth Gray and Mark Ballinger work at Fort Riley for the Military Severely Injured Center contracted by the Department of Defense to help the armed services provide all the care and assistance wounded Soldiers deserve, Gray explained.

The center is a 24-hour, seven-days-a-week service of Military OneSource that helps wounded Soldiers and their families in a variety of ways.

Counselor/advocates look for resources

The two counselor/advocates at Fort Riley can help Soldiers and their families look for financial support, pursue education and employment opportunities, take advantage of Veterans Administration benefits, find child care support and family counseling, seek local community resources available to them and deal with specific service issues, such as the lag time between the end of active duty pay and the start of VA entitlements or even promotions that could be affected because of their medical hold status.

One such issue affects many wounded Soldiers at Fort Riley, Gray said. Soldiers who did not refuse enrollment for traumatic injury protection through the Servicemen's Group Life Insurance program could be entitled to as much as \$100,000. Gray said some of the Soldiers recovering at Fort Riley may be entitled to a one-time, lump sum payment of \$25,000 for their disability.

The amount of the disability benefit depends on the extent of the injuries a Soldier suffered, Ballinger added.

Gray and Ballinger started working at Fort Riley in November 2005. They were hired and assigned to Fort Riley after Barbara Thompson of the Office of the Secretary of Defense visited the post in May 2005 to explain about the center and what it could offer to help wounded Soldiers and their family members.

“We had been struggling for about two years, using local assets to give all the services available and deserved by severely wounded Soldiers,” said Ken Steggeman, installation adjutant general in charge of personnel services. “What she offered was just what we needed.”

Adding the two counselor/advocates at Fort Riley put referral to all available resources in one location, easily accessible to Soldiers and families, Steggeman said. It also gave Fort Riley two more people dedicated to finding other resources that could be used to help individuals with unique needs, he said.

Right now, Gray and Ballinger put a lot of effort into getting needed information to wounded Soldiers, family members, military leaders on post and care professionals.

“We want everyone to know who we are and what we do,” Gray said.

The two specialists have otherwise helped 14 Soldiers and their family members with individual needs, but they expect that number to increase as more people learn about what they can do to assist Soldiers and families.

Each severely wounded Soldier is assigned a case manager at the MSI Center in Washington, D.C., and at the local hospital where care is being given, Gray explained. That is to ensure that no servicemember gets less than the best care and help in adjusting to his or her injuries, she said.

Case managers at the Fort Riley Casualty Assistance Office estimate that a few hundred Soldiers they treated left the Army before Gray and Ballinger were hired.

Some may still need assistance, and the two advocates will try to track them down to help them if help is needed, Ballinger said.

“We think 100 to 200 of those Soldiers who left in 2005 have likely stayed in the area, so they might not be hard to find,” Ballinger said. Trying to track everyone back to 2001 will be difficult, especially because so many Reserve and National Guard Soldiers demobilized through Fort Riley, he added.

The two counselor/advocates are concentrating on finding Soldiers released within the past year, and then they will expand their search as they have time and resources to do that.

For those Soldiers still on active duty and in rehabilitation for return to duty or before being released from active duty on the recommendation of a medical board, Gray and Ballinger do what they can to search for assistance that can ease the Soldier's return to a more normal life, ease his or her life while recovering, cut red tape for VA benefits or help the Soldier become mentally prepared for the medical board process, Gray said.

"We have wounded Soldiers at Fort Riley, and they deserve our assistance and access to all programs that can help them," she said.